

**DAVID LODGE'S *THE BRITISH MUSEUM IS FALLING DOWN*:  
A HARROWING DAY WITH A RESEARCH SCHOLAR**

**Tanmay Chatterjee**  
Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Faculty of Arts  
Banaras Hindu University, (U.P.)

**Abstract**

In *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965), David Lodge has turned his unsparing and uncanny comic vision on the hazards and quagmire of intellectual and academic life as well as the shifting sands of university faculties, appointments, promotions, tenures and an incessant quest for academic power. In this modern comedy of academic manners, Lodge has arrived unfailingly at his *métier* - comedy tinged with a certain, succinct satire. Spanning a day in the life of a frazzled, diffident and hapless doctoral candidate Adam Appleby, the novel follows his mythopoeic quest to override his intellectual and artistic sterility. The quintessential predicament of frazzled research scholars and their inability to engineer academic success assume global dimensions and relevance here. The quest for academic fruition has a certain mythical underpinning attached to it.

**Key Words:** academic life, comedy, research scholar(s), Adam Appleby, David Lodge, *The British Museum Is Falling Down*

*The British Museum Is Falling Down* is David Lodge's first novel centred in and around the trials and tribulations of academic life. It tells the comic story of a day in the life of twenty-five year old Adam Appleby, a postgraduate student of English literature at an anonymous British college. He is presently working on his Ph.D. thesis which, he thinks, "would rock the scholarly world and start a revolution in literary criticism" (Lodge 18). British Museum library is the place where he spends most of his time – for research and study. He is married with three children and what preoccupies him is his wife Barbara's overdue menstrual cycle. Over the course of a single day, readers witness Adam's struggle(s) in the British Museum, at the English Department of his college, at a postgraduate sherry party and his progressively ineffectual interactions with the staff as well as with his wife, routinely checking in on her to see if she is pregnant. Set largely in an academic ambience, the novel gives us insights into the plights and predicaments of postgraduate research students. The issues and concerns of the research students in this novel appear, more or less, common to all researchers of humanities across the globe.

Instead of a university campus *The British Museum Is Falling Down* has the famous British Museum Reading Room as its academic setting. It is Adam's workplace and he spends much of his day studying there. Using the womb metaphor Lodge gives a wonderful account of the Reading Room ambience when Adam enters it for the first time on the given day of the novel:

He passed through the narrow vaginal space, and entered the huge womb of the Reading Room. Across the floor, dispersed along radiating desks, scholars curled, foetus-like, over their books, little buds of intellectual life thrown off by some gigantic act of generation performed upon that nest of knowledge, those inexhaustible ovaries of learning, the concentric inner rings of the catalogue shelves. (Lodge 40-1)

Adam's thesis is about Modern English novels, the original subject of which was "Language and Ideology in Modern Fiction." Later, the Board of Studies of his department found his topic too challenging, and changed it. Now the subject of his thesis stands as "The Structure of Long Sentences in Three Modern English novels" (Lodge 44). But even this considerable help from the Board of Studies in delimiting his thesis topic has not made Adam's task any easier. He is yet to decide which three novels he is going to analyze, or how long a long sentence is. Consequently he has nothing to say or write about his topic in the final year of his scholarship. Lawrence, he only thinks hopefully, would produce lots of sentences where the issue would not be in doubt. He ruminates, "Show me the happy scholar . . . and I will show you the bliss of ignorance" (89).

Earlier, when Adam was working on his original topic of research he took voluminous notes on some minor catholic writers. He was particularly interested in Egbert Merrymarsh, the Catholic belletrist, a younger contemporary of Chesterton and Belloc. Adam did an exhaustive research on Merrymarsh. He, in fact, wrote a whole chapter, tentatively entitled "The Divine Wisecrack" on Merrymarsh's use of paradox and antithesis to prop up his facile Christian apologetics. All this efforts and preparations now appear to him as "wasted labour" (Lodge 44).

In the British Museum reading room Adam comes across Camel, a fellow research scholar at his department. Camel also works at the British Museum library for his research. Like Adam he, too, has problems in finishing the Ph.D. thesis that he has been working on "as long as anyone could remember" (Lodge 35):

Its title—"Sanitation in Victorian Fiction"—seemed modest enough; but, as Camel would patiently explain, the absence of references to sanitation was as significant as the presence of the same, and his work thus embraced the entire corpus of Victorian fiction. Further, the Victorian period was best understood as a period of transition in which the comic treatment of human excretion in the eighteenth century was suppressed in terms of social reform, until it re-emerged as a source of literary symbolism in the work of Joyce and other moderns. (35)

Camel no longer receives any scholarship; he sustains himself by teaching English to foreign students in evening classes. He finds it extremely difficult to get on with his research work, and has not written anything on his topic as yet:

Some time ago a wild rumor had swept through Bloomsbury to the effect that Camel had written his first chapter, on the hygiene of Neanderthal Man; but Camel wistfully denied it. 'I'm the modern Casaubon,' he would say. 'Don't expect progress.' (Lodge 36)

As Daniel Ammann notes, "both Adam and Camel are quite intelligent graduate students who have original ideas of their own and an urge to shape the future of literary criticism; however, they are unwillingly bound to the predicaments of their individual lives, which do not grudge them the required concentration for their scholarly pursuits" (39). Certain issues of everyday life, which are deemed to be quite trivial in gravity, matter a lot more to these graduates. For instance, the expiry of Adam's Library Card, and the bureaucratic process of its

renewal can ruin Adam's whole day of study. Needless to say, the possibility of his wife's being pregnant again and his being unemployed at this current stage of his life, depresses Adam more than anything, motivating him to think of ways to support four little children without basic sustenance. Lodge points out this problem right before he concentrates on the academic quest for power.

In Adam's visit to consult his supervisor Briggs at the college, Lodge portrays an incorrigible view of the academic issues experienced from the eyes of his postgraduate protagonist. The building that houses the English department of Adam's college is described as an old and undistinguished one. But this worn out building has its own history. The brick built structure, stained with soot and streaked with rain water, was once a warehouse. When the expanding college bought the freehold, rather than demolish the building they skillfully converted the interior to class rooms and narrow, cell like offices by means of matchboard partitions. It does not appear to be a very comfortable and elegant building; but it has character.

When Adam comes to the department and enters Professor Briggs' room, he finds him conversing with Bane, a fellow professor at the department:

He [Briggs] was talking to Bane, who had recently been appointed to a new Chair of Absurdist Drama, endowed by a commercial television company. This I knew, had been a blow to Briggs, who was the senior man of the two, and who had been looking for a Chair for some time. His own field was the English Essay. No one was likely to endow a special Chair in the English Essay, and Briggs knew it. His best chance of promotion lay in the retirement of the Head of the Department, old Howells, who was always raising Briggs's expectations by retreating at the beginning of term to a Swiss sanatorium, only to dash them again by returning refreshed and reinvigorated at the beginning of vacations.

The posture of the two men seemed to illustrate their relationship. Bane was sprawled in Briggs's lumpy armchair, his legs stretched out over the brown linoleum. Briggs stood by the window, uneasily fingering the ridges of the radiator. (Lodge 64)

Adam learns that Bane has come to Briggs with a proposal of exchanging their rooms. But Briggs is in no mood to change his accommodation. Adam analyzes the situation:

I felt a certain thrill at being witness to one of those classic struggles for power and prestige which characterizes the lives of ambitious men and which, in truth, exhaust most of their time and energy. To the casual observer, it might seem that nothing important was at stake here, but it might well be that the future course of English studies in the University hung upon this conversation. (Lodge 65)

Bane argues that he wishes to move to Briggs's room since Professor Howells, the Head of the Department, wants all the professors with chairs together on one floor. But, ultimately, Briggs somehow prevails over Bane's design:

'[. . .] To be honest with you, the thing I have most against a move is my collection here.' Briggs gestured towards the huge, ugly, worm eaten bookcase that housed his collection of the English essayists: Addison, Steele, Johnson, Lamb, Hazlitt, Belloc, Chesterton . . . even Egbert Merrymarsh was represented here by a slim, white-buckram volume privately printed by Carthusian monks on hand-made paper. 'I just don't see how it will fit into your room,' explained Briggs.

This was Briggs' trump-card. His collection was famous and no one would dare to suggest that he break it up. (Lodge 65-6)

At this, Bane finds nothing to say against Briggs's contention. He gives up and leaves. Briggs' countenance brightens momentarily at Bane's departure. But it appears that the hidden pressures of the conversation have taken their toll, and he seems a tired and defeated man.

When Bane is gone, Briggs turns his attention to Adam and we experience the quintessential supervisor-research scholar conversation between them. First, Adam faces the question which every research scholar has to face from his/her supervisor every time they meet: "How's the research going?" (Lodge 66). To this typical question Adam gives a clichéd answer: "I will start writing soon" (66). He tells Briggs that he will not be able to submit his thesis by next June; instead, he will have to get an extension till October. He also tells Briggs that he is facing a financial crisis, and desperately wants a job next academic year. He alludes delicately to the possibility of a vacancy in the Department, caused by Bane's new chair. Briggs listens patiently to Adam and gives him a practical suggestion:

'Then I have only one word of advice to you, Appleby. Publish! Publish or perish! That's how it is in the academic world these days. There was a time when appointment was made on a more human basis, but not any more.' (Lodge 66)

Briggs further suggests Adam to publish something on Merrymarsh. When Adam expresses his reservations that Merrymarsh might not be of much academic interest in the present scenario, Briggs sounds a bit shrewd:

'Interest? Interest doesn't matter, as long as you get it published. Who do you suppose is interested in absurdist drama?' (Lodge 67)

Adam leaves Briggs' room when the conversation is over; and on his way out of the building he meets Bane again. He takes the opportunity to ask his advice on a trivial bibliographical issue. Bane seems flattered by the enquiry, and takes him up to his room to look up the reference. When Adam finally leaves the college campus and is on his way back to the British Museum, we find him still musing on his encounters with the two professors: I wondered idly which man I disliked most, Briggs or Bane. (Lodge 67)

Later in the novel we find that Adam comes to know about some unpublished manuscripts of Egbert Merrymarsh. He strives hard to secure them as he thinks these may well earn him some academic recognition. He goes to visit Mrs. Rottingdean, a relative of the deceased author, at her place in Bayswater. But there he finds himself amidst disagreeable circumstances. Ultimately, it turns out that he can have the manuscripts only if he agrees to a carnal relationship with Virginia, the lewd daughter of Mrs. Rottingdean. Adam somehow manages to desist and escape from the clutches of Virginia. He leaves the house of Mrs. Rottingdean without accomplishing anything. As Bruce K. Martin observes, this entire episode is suggestive of Adam's moral integrity (106). A staunch Catholic as he is, he *has* to care naught for such overtly 'sinful' temptations.

Apart from the private meetings behind closed doors, another basic occasion, which serves as a setting for the academic satires of Lodge, is the literary party. In his first attempt to describe one, Lodge interprets thus:

The postgraduate sherry party was a regular feature of the first term of the academic year, designed to introduce students to staff and to each other. For many, it was hail and farewell, since the Department did not have the resources to mount a proper graduate program, and in any case, espoused the traditional belief that research was a lonely and eremitic occupation, a test of character and

learning, which might be vitiated by excessive human contact. As if they sensed this the new postgraduates, particularly those from overseas, roamed the floor eagerly accosting the senior guests, resolved to cram a whole year's sociability into the brief evening. (Lodge 118)

In the "Afterword", Lodge states the main idea behind his decision to insert a party scene into his novel: "My association with Malcolm Bradbury, and the example of his own work in comedy, was therefore a crucial factor in this development of my writing, and the dedication to *The British Museum*, as well as the sherry party scene, acknowledges that debt" (Lodge 170). Like many literary parties, this "sherry-party" has a purpose of introducing people to each other as well as discussing literature. In this party scene too, Lodge doesn't fail to employ his witty criticisms on academic struggle.

When Adam returns from Bayswater, he finds the sherry party in full swing. The first person he meets at the party turns out to be an Indian who introduces himself as Alibai. He tells Adam that he is doing his Ph.D. on the works of Shani Hodder, an Anglo Indian novelist. But Alibai is disappointed as he learns that nobody else is acquainted with the name of the author he is working on. Adam consoles him by saying that this is an issue with most research scholars.

Adam then goes to the bar and finds himself face to face with a bald headed man in a pale striped suit. His conversation with this man is quite engaging:

'What do you think of anus?' said the man.

'I beg your pardon?'

'The novelist, Kingsley Anus,' said the man impatiently.

'Oh yes, I like his work. There are times when I think I belong to him more than to any of the others.'

'Please?'

'Well, you see, I have this theory,' Adam, who had just thought of it, said expansively. 'Has it ever occurred to you how novelists are *using up* experience at a dangerous rate? No, I see it hasn't. Well, then, consider that before the novel emerged as a dominant literary form, narrative literature dealt only with the extraordinary or the allegorical-with kings and queens, giants and dragons, sublime virtue and diabolical evil. There was no risk of confusing that sort of thing with life, of course. But as soon as the novel got going, you might pick up a book at any time and read about an ordinary chap called Joe Smith doing just the sort of things you did yourself. Now, I know what you are going to say- you are going to say that the novelist still has to invent a lot. But that's just the point: There have been such a fantastic number of novels written in the last couple of centuries that they have just about exhausted the possibilities of life. So all of us, you see, are really enacting events that have already been written about in some novel or the other. Of course, most people don't realize this- they fondly imagine that their little lives are unique . . . Just as well, too, because when you *do* tumble to it, the effect is very disturbing.'

'Would you say,' said the man at length, 'that Anus is superior or inferior to C. P. Snow?'

'I don't know that you can compare them,' said Adam wearily.

'I have to: they are the only British novelists I have read.' (Lodge 119-20)

While Adam converses with the baldheaded man, Camel arrives on the scene. He tells Adam that he has come to know from Barbara about her possible pregnancy. He realizes Adam's concern and asks him to plead to the Department authority for a job. In order to convince Adam in this regard Camel tells him how Professor Bane happened to secure his first promotion:

‘Listen, do you know how Bane got his first promotion? He was telling me the other day: he'd been assistant lecturer for six years without murmuring when one day his tank burst and he couldn't pay the plumber. He rushed straight into Howell's room and demanded promotion. Howells made him up on the spot and back-dated his pay six months. Seems it had just slipped his mind.’ (Lodge 122)

While Adam and Camel have a casual discussion about how to approach Professor Howells, the Head of the Department, with the plea for a faculty post, Professor Bane comes to join them. He is Camel's current supervisor; his first supervisor died while in office. Bane asks Camel about his progress in his research pursuits. To which Camel says that he is working on a new interpretation of *The Ambassadors*. He, then, engages Bane and Adam in an interesting discussion regarding his new discovery:

You remember how Strether refuses to tell how Maria Gostrey the nature of manufactured article on which the New-some fortune is based?

‘I do Indeed,’ said Bane. . . .

‘And you recall that James, quite typically refuses to tell *us* what it is?’ Camel went on. Bane nodded. . . . People nearby pricked up their ears and began to drift towards Camel, who was always a draw. ‘Strether describes it as a “small trivial, rather ridiculous object of the commonest use,” but “wanting in dignity.” Scholars have argued for years about what it could be.’ Camel paused to light his pipe, holding his audience in suspense. ‘Well, I'm convinced that it was a chamber pot,’ he said at last.

The girls among his listeners giggled and nudged each other. This was what they had come to hear.

‘Once you see it, it becomes a symbol as important as the bowl in *The Chamber Bowl*,’ said Camel.

‘Very interesting,’ said Bane. ‘And what do you think, Mr. Appleby?’

‘I think it was contraceptives,’ said Adam. (Lodge 123)

Adam in his frenzied state of mind cannot think of anything else. But, he may not be wrong in his assumption, after all. Contraceptives, he argues, may well be the things Strether has in mind:

‘What's wrong?’ Adam complained. ‘Isn't everyone entitled to his *idée fixe*? Anyway, you can't describe a chamber pot as small.’ (Lodge 123)

But Adam's words disturb Bane's composure. He flushes and walks away.

After the departure of Bane, Camel and Adam resume their earlier discussion. Camel suggests Adam to request Briggs to recommend him to Howells for the new post caused by Bane's new chair. Adam decides to try Camel's suggestions. After a while, when he eventually comes across Briggs he takes the opportunity to tell him about his deplorable condition:

‘I'm desperate,’ Adam said. ‘I can't get on with my work because I'm worrying all the time about my family. Our flat is full of beds already. And I have nowhere to study. The children need new shoes and the electricity may be cut off at any moment. Yesterday, the youngest child developed a rash: we think it's rickets.’ . . .

‘This is my farewell to the academic life,’ he said. ‘Tomorrow I shall burn all my notes and take a job on the buses.’ (Lodge 124)

Briggs seems to understand Adam's desperation. He asks Adam to be less impulsive and assures him that he will try to do something fruitful for him.

As Briggs goes, Alibai comes back to Adam to tell him that he has decided to change the subject of his thesis. He asks Adam to suggest to him a viable research topic. When Adam suggests Egbert Merrymarsh, Alibai says that he would rather prefer "someone with Indian connections" or "some unquestionable major figure" like D. H. Lawrence (Lodge 128). Adam, then, introduces Alibai to Pond, his friend, who is also present at the party. Pond, being a "great expert on Anglo-Indian relations," takes interest in Alibai and tries to help him choose a suitable topic. Ultimately, after much deliberation and consultation, Alibai decides to work on the influence of the *Kama Sutra* on contemporary fiction.

In the mean time, Briggs returns to deliver the good news to Adam:

He [Briggs] drew Adam aside, conspiratorially. 'There will be a vacancy coming up in the department, as it happens,' he murmured. 'I've spoken to the Prof and he seemed quite favorably disposed.' [. . .] 'I put in a very strong plea on the grounds of your . . . personal circumstances,' said Briggs. (Lodge 125)

Briggs also tells Adam that he will try to find an opportunity to introduce him to Howells. Adam gets very excited upon hearing this. Before leaving, Briggs, a seasoned academician as he is, implores him to temper his excitement and keep this a secret:

'There are all kinds of forces at play in the academic world, as you will discover for yourself. Discretion is vital. Mum's the word.' (Lodge 129)

But Adam fails to resist himself. He tells Camel all about it. He goes on to call Barbara and gives her the news.

After a while, Briggs returns and takes Adam to Howells. But this little encounter with the Head of the Department serves only to ruin Adam's desperate hopes:

He stood behind Howells' broad back, dry-mouthed and trembling, as Briggs stooped to whisper in the professor's ear. Howells turned his big, bloodshot eyes upon Adam. 'Its Appleby I wanted to see,' he said to Briggs. 'This is Mr. Appleby, Prof.' 'No, Briggs. This is Camel.' 'I assure you—' It's Appleby I want, Briggs. The one who's working on sewage in the nineteenth century or some such thing. Bright man—Bane told me about him. You've got them mixed up.' He gave a short barking laugh, and turned back to his cronies. 'Tell Appleby I want to see him,' he threw over his shoulder. 'I'll tell him,' said Adam, speaking for the first time. (Lodge 129)

Evidently, there has been a serious misunderstanding. Howells has confused Adam with Camel. It is Camel who he is interested in, not Adam. Briggs suspects foul play in the entire thing. He thinks that Bane, who is now very close to Howells, has somehow managed to convince him to offer Camel the new post in the Department. Adam comes to realize the 'forces at play in the academic world.' The later course of events leads to the revelation of a scheme already carefully planned by the Department to offer Camel a lectureship and to put him on probation until he finishes his Ph.D. This scheme leaves Adam out of the whole scenario and motivates Camel to finish his thesis at the earliest.

The surprising turn of events devastates Adam. In a desperate state of mind he decides to go back to Merrymarsh's relatives at Bayswater. The yet unpublished confessional writings of Merrymarsh appear to him his last hope:

He had reached the moment of decision, and he did not wish to be swayed from his purpose. He would return to Bayswater. He would get his hands on

Merrymarsh's scandalous confessions, and with them he would deal a swinging blow at the literary establishment, at academe, at Catholicism, at fate. He would publish his findings to the world, and leap to fame or perdition in a blaze of notoriety. (Lodge 131)

In the "Afterword", Lodge tells us that he had written *The British Museum Is Falling Down* during his "absence from [his] post as lecturer in English Literature at the University of Birmingham to take up a Harkness Commonwealth Fellowship in America," with a "liberating effect of the American experience" (Lodge 163). This "American experience," which Lodge further analyses in his later novels, is first introduced in this novel and characterized by an American entrepreneur called Bernie Schnitz, a fat American who is smoking a cigar every time Adam sees him and happens to be in Britain to buy the whole British Museum:

'I had this great idea, a vision, you might call it. I was going to buy the British Museum and transport it stone by stone to Colorado, clean it up and re-erect it.'

Adam boggled. 'With all the books?'

'Yeah, you see, we have this little college in Colorado, high up in the Rockies-highest school in the world as a matter of fact, we have to have oxygen on tap in every room . . . Well, it's a fine place, but we are not expanding as we should be-you know, we are not getting the good students, the top teachers. So I told the trustees what was needed: a real class library- rare books, original manuscripts, that sort of thing. "Ok Bernie," they said," go to Europe and get us a library." So I came to the best library in the world.' (Lodge 151)

Although this passage is humorous enough, and Lodge's novel happens to be a comedy of manners, it serves as a good example of the way Lodge deals with the 'free-spirited' Americans, whom he compares and contrasts with the British in his later novels.

*The British Museum Is Falling Down* registers the first ever critique of the academic paraphernalia ever written by Lodge in a published novel, a subject which Lodge would become a master of in his later novels. Promotions, tenure and the unending quest for power in the academic world are structured as the basic concerns of his later academic novels. In this novel Lodge also obliquely satirizes the precursors of the academic novel, namely Kingsley Amis and C. P. Snow with their novels *Lucky Jim* and *The Masters*. In this context, Robert A. Morace states, "Further, like Adam Appleby, Lodge felt the weight of the literary past and as a result chose to turn the novel into 'a kind of novel on myself' ("David Lodge Interviewed" 110 [as cited in Morace]), an act of comic revenge" (137). Therefore, Lodge not only satirizes the authors who, in some way or the other, influenced his writing style, but also satirizes himself as a recent collaborator to the kind of fiction he criticizes in this novel.

### Works Cited:

- Ammann, Daniel. *David Lodge and the Art-and-Reality Novel*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2008. Print.
- Lodge, David. *The British Museum Is Falling Down*. London: Vintage, 1965. Print.
- Martin, Bruce K. (1999). *David Lodge*. New York: Twayne, 1999. Print.
- Morace, Robert A. *The Dialogic Novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.